

Midtown Messenger

by **Carl Schiffman**

By early January of 1952 I had a new after school job, this time for the Composing Room, a print shop on West 46th Street. The High School of Performing Arts was just next door. I worked picking up and delivering layouts, proofs, and revised proofs of advertisements composed by printers working at giant linotype machines and from wooden boxes of hand-set type in a bright noisy space on the far side of a counter to which we messengers would be called to be assigned our trips.

I was generally given three or four good-sized manila envelopes to deliver and about as many pick-ups to make, written out on separate slips of paper. Deliveries were usually made to a receptionist and pick-ups too, would often be waiting for me at her desk. I wouldn't have to say a word. Other times I would be sent beyond the reception area to contact a specific individual or department. I took particular pleasure in those occasions, especially once I had begun to learn my way through the frequently labyrinthine interior offices.

My job would have been much the same, I suppose, if I had been delivering proofs for grocery chains or department stores. Being a messenger just meant finding a sequence of addresses after all, working out the most efficient or most enjoyable route linking them. But the Composing Room had interesting clients. I once had to deliver a set of proofs of book ads to Margaret Mead at the Museum of Natural History. I hadn't read the second line on the envelope, so instead of delivering the proofs to whatever office in the museum they were addressed to, I asked for Dr. Mead and was sent up to her eyrie in one of the stone towers of the Museum.

Dr. Mead was unhappy at the interruption, she said something nasty to the secretary who had let me in, then her blue eyes blazed at me. "Can't you read? It says—" And she told me what street entrance was written on the envelope. "I would expect," she said, "a messenger to know something about geography."

I was furious at her tone and at that little bit of urban anthropology that characterized me—now and forever presumably—as a messenger. "I might," I snapped back in anger, "have other interests!" She stared at me in wonder. An anthropoid had talked back. Her face lit in a brief and wonderful smile.

The prime activity of the Composing Room was printing advertisements for books. My job was special, different, important, because of that. Because it brought me, day after day, into the revered places whose names appeared on the cover and title page of every book I read. The book connection was instrumental in getting me the job. My friend Herman, who lived in my apartment house, had been working as a part-time messenger at Composing Room since fall. He had gotten the job through his family's multiple connections with publishing; his step-father, Albert H. Gross, was a well-known Yiddish to English translator, who had translated Isaac Bashevis Singer's first novel, *The Family Moscat*, for Knopf. Herman's step-sister, Nancy, was an editor at *Scientific American*, which published book ads.

If I found romance in visiting famous publishing houses, even if I got no further than the reception desk, it was because books were privileged objects for me. My family, it must be admitted, unlike Herman's, paid chiefly lip service to literature. My father may have, as he claimed, read everything that mattered in European literature before he came to the United States at age twenty-eight; what I actually saw him reading as I grew up were Perry Mason and Ellery Queen mysteries, and other detective novels that came three to a volume from the Mystery Book Club. He also read historical romances by Dumas, some H.G. Wells, and occasionally, but always with sovereign contempt, American best-sellers.

My mother's reading habits were a mystery to me. I recall well-worn volumes of Keats or Shelley on her bedside table. My aunt Norma, who had her own bedroom and bath in our apartment, had built-in bookcases filled with publications by or about Marx and Lenin, primers on dialectical materialism, the collected works of Jack London, but never to my knowledge read anything more demanding than the *Daily Worker* or some propaganda booklet telling her what Party line to toe; perhaps she read a few novels by the left-wing author, Howard Fast.

Out of this inauspicious brew, perhaps more out of what my family talked about

over dinner than what it actually read, my own delight in reading emerged. What was most remarkable was the intensity I was able to bring to whatever I read. I read Modern Library Giants, long long books like the Studs Lonigan trilogy or *Of Human Bondage*, in a single day. I think my impulse was purely escapist. I had a science fiction collection of hundreds of magazines that included a complete run of *Astounding* back to 1940 or 41, and many copies before that; I owned every issue of *Galaxy* and many copies of the large format pulps with the lurid front covers, *Fantastic Adventures* and *Amazing Stories*, dating back to the 1930s. I haunted used book stores—especially Stephen's Fantasy Book Service—for back-issues to fill the gaps in my collections.

There would come a time when the content of my reading would deeply affect my life; for now though, the books I read so avidly on the messengers' bench were books I entered like a movie theatre, leaving my own daily life outside. Perhaps that was why I was able to concentrate so well.

The *cachet* of the publishing houses did not exist only in my head, and was not just the glorification of familiar names like Random House (which published Modern Library) or Scribner's (for Hemingway) or Doubleday (which had recently begun publishing science fiction in hard cover). What mattered as much to me was the physical impression these houses made, their decor and their location in the city. I took great pleasure, for instance, in visiting Macmillan Company in its own building—now occupied by *Forbes Magazine*—on lower Fifth Avenue or visiting McGraw Hill in its green skyscraper on West 42nd Street, even though I had small or no idea what authors they published. Simon and Schuster and Pocket Books occupied either adjacent floors or opposite ends of the same floor in the RCA Building. I loved riding the sleek elevators, admired the sepia murals in the lobby.

Doubleday and Harcourt Brace, both in rather ordinary office buildings on Madison Avenue, impressed me with their modernity, open floor plans with indirect lighting and mazes of cubicles that seemed like a foretaste of the future. Knopf, by contrast, in a staid office building at Madison and 52nd, had thick carpets and wood paneling, seemed to deny the reality Doubleday and Harcourt Brace were so eagerly embracing. Best of all, most romantic and rewarding, were the offices of Harper Bros., not yet Harper & Row, in a fine 19th century brownstone off Madison Avenue in Murray

Hill; and the offices of Random House in the north wing of the Italian Renaissance style Villard Houses on Madison between 50th and 51st Streets; most of the Villard Houses, now a shell behind which a giant hotel looms, were then occupied by the Roman Catholic Diocese of New York and I was captivated by the juxtaposition. Just to enter Random House though, to climb the narrow winding flight of stairs to an upper floor, was to leave my daily self behind as effectively as though I had opened a book and vanished between its covers.

The freedom I had to move through the city streets when I was out on a "run" or to read on the bench while I was waiting to be sent out, the kindness and good humor of the dispatchers, the absence of close or nagging supervision, were not sufficient to insulate me from a feeling of humiliation at being a messenger. The feeling grew much more intense once the school year ended and I began to work full time. Part of the problem was that the other full-time messengers were—how do I make myself sound like less of a snob than I probably was?—enough to inspire disdain in the most open-hearted receptionist. They were uneducated, scruffy, surly, sometimes elderly, sometimes alcoholic, sometimes partly deranged. Like myself, they were minimum wage workers, a thin cut above daily laborers. And in their eyes, and the eyes of the public who saw me moving through the streets with my armloads of proofs, and above all in the eyes of those young and beautifully groomed, inevitably haughty receptionists, I was one of them. My friend Herman was away working as a counselor in the Poconos. I missed him a lot.

It was only during the summer that I began to cheat my employers. Not that I ever dumped proofs in a trash basket the way I had political pamphlets I had been paid to distribute years before. We messengers were supposed to take busses for any distance over eight or ten blocks. I walked everything up to twenty blocks or more and filed a petty cash slip for my five-cent fare. Very occasionally, I was required to deliver a block of actual set type rather than a proof. The first time was a joke. The dispatcher gestured casually at a small paper-wrapped parcel on top of the counter and told me to make it my first stop. I slid my fingers under the string that tied the parcel, and then stood there transfixed, as though my hand had been nailed to the counter, while the dispatcher and a few of the nearby printers laughed. The parcel must have weighed

thirty or forty pounds. I began by taking cabs as I was supposed to, but by summer I was either walking or taking busses with the lead weight, billing petty cash for imaginary cab fare.

I don't believe that the job itself, whatever occasional humiliation I may have felt, prompted my dishonesty. I did not feel exploited or taken advantage of in any way. Outside factors had weight. I had been accepted at the University of Chicago, but I had not won a scholarship and my family could not afford to send me there without one. I don't know whether I was angrier at myself for failing the scholarship exam or at my father, who had always managed to send himself to Florida for a couple of months every winter, with plenty of money in his pockets for the race tracks and the card games, for not having the money to send me to Chicago. Writing sixty-five years later, I am struck by how angry at my father I must have been. He had all the answers, had read all the books, was chock full of innate ability, but he hadn't been able to pay for what I cared about most, which was getting away from him.



Carl Schiffman's stories and essays have appeared in *Missouri Review*, *New England Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Southern Review*, *Transatlantic Review*, and elsewhere since he first began publishing in 1972. A native New Yorker, Carl studied playwriting with Paul Goodman at the Living Theatre and with John Gassner at Yale Drama School. Retired for over twenty years, he made his living—after a shaky start—as a case worker with neglected or delinquent children, as a state and federal civil rights investigator, and finally as a writer for non-profit organizations and fundraising consulting firms, including work for the Legal Defense Fund, Memorial-Sloan Cancer Center, the NAACP, and the New York Public Library.